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ABSTRACT

In fall 1985, a survey was conducted of 362 full-time faculty and senior-level administrators at the 30 State University of New York (SUNY) community colleges to determine faculty and administrator preferences with respect to four institutional directions and seven images for the SUNY community colleges in general and for their institution in particular. The directions assessed were "academically oriented two-year college," "community-based learning center," "comprehensive community college," and "postsecondary occupational training center," while the images were "democratization of higher education," "a second chance for people," "something for everybody," "comprehensive two-year curriculum," "a college for its community," "excellence in teaching," and "a student-oriented institution." Study findings, based on a 76% usable response rate from the administrators, and a 60% usable response rate for faculty, included the following: (1) both groups preferred the "comprehensive community college" direction for the SUNY colleges as a whole and their own institution and gave little support for the other three directions; (2) the images desired most by the administrators were "college for its community," followed by "excellence in teaching" and "comprehensive two-year curriculum"; (3) faculty preferred the same images though in the reverse order; and (4) administrators generally preferred the same image for their own college as for the system. (EJV)

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Mission and Images for SUNY Community Colleges: A View from Within

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In any discussion of new or current missions for the community college, some people attribute social functions to the institution which others see as little related to the educational functions described in the mission statement. Thus one person reading a mission statement sees an indication of what educational goals the institution most values, while another sees social class tracking or perversion of the concept of college. Since these conflicting perspectives usually go unstated, we end up with people talking past one another rather than with one another. To avoid this situation and to clarify the terms of the discourse regarding missions and images of community colleges, I want to briefly categorize what I see as the three major viewpoints or stances about the community college:

1) First we have the Leftists, those who are politically left of capitalism and thus are advocates for a classless society. They view the community college with distaste because it is seen by them as an agent of capitalism, training people from blue-collar backgrounds for blue-collar jobs or lower-level middle-class jobs, and in so doing, is replicating the current class structure with all its obvious inequities.

2) Then there are the Rightists, who also view the community college with distaste but for different reasons. To the Rightists, and by this I mean educational elitists, the community college is primarily responsible for the dilution of educational standards in higher education since it is the

primary agent or means for opening up higher education to the masses. It tries to pass itself off as a college although clearly it is not because it offers vocational training and remedial programs in basic English, math, and reading, and admits students who clearly wouldn't "make the grade" in any reputable college or university. However, the community college is of use because at least it keeps the educational riffraff away from the"real" colleges.

3) Finally, we have the Mainstreamists, those who view education within a conventional political orientation, i.e. capitalism, and who believe in the merits of education for all, not just the intellectual and social elite. To the Mainstreamists the community college serves as the path to upward mobility for many an individual who gains both education and a better job as a result of attending the community college.

I've drawn the outlines of these categories with broad strokes, omitting some nuances, but the purpose was to give you a feel for the three major perspectives with which any data on the community college might be interpreted. Notice that of these perspectives, the ones of the Leftists and the Rightists seem to stand outside of the community college, viewing it an an "other," something alien and distant from the perceiver (I would like to add not understood by the perceiver, but that is debatable). Indeed, many of those who hold these perspectives are literal outsiders to the community college: rarely have they ever taught or been an administrator in a community college.

To me the intriging questions then become, "How do those who are within the institution see the institution? What do they want it to be?" In essence, these are the questions which guided my study of SUNY community colleges conducted last year and are the focus of my presentation today. Now to the study.

Last fall I asked a randomly selcted sample of 362 full-time faculty and all senior-level administrators (presidents, vice-presidents, and deans) of the thirty SUNY community colleges to complete a questionnaire regarding their preferences for four institutional directions and seven images for SUNY community colleges in general and for their own institution in particular. Here is a listing of those directions and images:

Institutional Directions:

1) Academically Oriented Two-Year College - This institution would commit most of its resources to degree-granting programs in both academic (transfer) and occupational-technical education while minimizing community service activities. In addition, it would have a general education core required of all students. Of all possible educational directions for the community college, this one would obviously be the most acceptable to the educational elitists, or the Rightists I mentioned earlier.

2) Community-Based Learning Center - Edmund Gleazer, the chief proponent of this direction, views this as an institution which would de-emphasize the formal structure of credit hours and courses, and serve as a center of a community learning network

where students are linked up with someone or someplace that can teach them what they want to know. Such an institution would be considered educationally frivilous by the Rightists and irrelevant by the Leftists.

3) Comprehensive Community College - Basically this direction is the current one of most community colleges. It involves giving approximately equal emphasis to the transfer, occupational-technical, and community service programs of the institution. It is a Mainstreamist approach or perspective to the institution.

4) Postsecondary Occupational Training Center - Such an institution would concentrate upon occupational training almost exclusively and in cooperation with industrial establishments as much as possible. There would be very limited offerings in the humanities and social sciences. Such an institution would clearly be anathema to the Leftists, who could then say, " I told you community colleges were agents of capitalism," and to the Rightists, who, while snubbing it educationally, would at least be pleased the word "college" was no longer in its title.

The images survey respondents could choose from were these:

1) Democratization of higher education - associates the community college with the opening up of higher education through open admissions and low cost.

2) A 'second chance' for people - offers this to people who have previously done poorly in an academic setting.

3) Something for everybody - indicates the community college's willingness to reach out and be, in essence, all things to all people.

4) Comprehensive two-year curriculum - enables the institution to be seen as offering "everything" from an educational or curricular perspective.

5) A college for its community - indicates the institution's responsiveness to community needs.

6) Excellence in teaching - highlights the emphasis community colleges place on teaching (as opposed to research) and thus on the student.

7) A student-oriented institution - emphasizes an institutional focus upon the student rather than the faculty or the content of the curriculum.

Collectively these images reflect the three major components of the mission of today's community colleges as seen by the Mainstreamists: open access, comprehensive curriculum, and community/local orientation. The images of "a democratizing institution" and "a 'second chance' for people" stem directly from the component of open access, while the images of "excellence in teaching" and "a student-oriented institution" reflect the community college's willingness to provide for the academic needs of non-traditional students, an indication of its openness. The images of "something for everybody" and "a comprehensive two-year curriculum" stem from the component of comprehensive curriculum, while the image of "a

college for its community" reflects the component of community/local orientation.

As I indicated earlier, both faculty and senior-level administrators were asked to indicate their preferences for these images and directions. In addition, they were asked some demographic questions such as their age, sex, and number of years of teaching or administrative experience in an effort to determine possible correlations between preferences and these characteristics.

What were the results? First of all, a fairly high response rate was obtained: 77% for the administrators with 76% of these usable; a 67% response rate for faculty with 60% of these usable. Next, frequency distributions and percentages of the preferences revealed the following:

1) There was close agreement between senior-level administrators and faculty about the preferred institutional directions of SUNY community colleges. Each group most preferred the direction of Comprehensive Community College, both for SUNY community colleges as a whole and for their own campuses. Specifically, 81% of administrators and over 75% of the faculty preferred this direction for their own campus, while 80% of the administrators and almost 77% of the faculty desired this direction for SUNY community colleges in general.

2) There was little supoort for the other three directions. That of Academically Oriented Two-Year College was the second most preferred, but it did not garner much support. Over 12% of the administrators and over 18% of the faculty preferred this direction for their own campus, while almost 16% of administrators

and almost 19% of faculty preferred this direction for SUNY in general. As this direction is most closely allied to the stance of the educational elitists or Rightists, it would seem that there is little support within the community college (or at least within SUNY community colleges) for such a stance.

3) The directions of Community-Based Learning Center and Post-secondary Occupational Training Center received little support. Fewer than 5% of the administrators and 2% of the faculty desired the direction of Community-Based Learning Center for their own campus. Only 3.3% of the administrators and 1.8% of the faculty desired this direction for SUNY community colleges in general.

Agreement on preferred images was not as clear cut but did follow similar patterns for each group:

1) The image most desired by administrators for their own campus was "College for Its Community" (36.7%), followed by "Excellence in Teaching" (23.3%), and then "Comprehensive Two-Year Curricuum" (14.4%). These same images were also the top three choices for the faculty for their own campus but to a different extent. Faculty most preferred the image of "Excellence in Teaching" (32%), then "A College for Its Community" (16.9%), closely followed by "Comprehensive Two-Year Curriculum" (15.5%).

2) For SUNY community colleges in general administrators preferred the same images that they did for their own campus: 26.7% preferred "A College for Its Community," 17.8% preferred "Excellence

in Teaching," and 16.7% preferred "Comprehensive Two-Year Curriculum." Faculty preferences varied, both from the administrators' and from their own preferences for their individual campuses. For SUNY in general, faculty preferred that "Excellence in Teaching" be the dominant image (35.2%), followed by "Comprehensive Two-Year Curriculum" (15.5%), and then "Something for Everyone" (13.7%).

The attempt to find correlations between demographic characteristics and preferences (in other words, to find out why faculty and administrators preferred the directions and images that they did) yielded only minimal results and shall be passed over today so that we can concentrate on discussion and implications of the preferences themselves.

What do these results suggest to us? As I mentioned earlier, there is strong agreement between SUNY community college faculty and administrators about the preferred direction for SUNY community colleges, an agreement I found somewhat surprising because of the stereotype we all have of administrators and faculty always being in opposing camps: the we-they mentality. It would seem to me to bode well for the future of SUNY's community colleges that faculty and administrators concur so closely in their preferences for the direction of these institutions. It is much easier for a direction to be achieved if those responsible for achieving it are in agreement about it and in support of it.

The direction of Academically Oriented Two-Year College, which is the one direction that would move the community college towards becoming a more educationally prestigious (at least in the eyes of educational elitists or Right-ists) did not receive much support from

either SUNY community college faculty or administrators. I found the faculty's relative lack of support for this direction somewhat surprising since one could argue that teaching in such an institution might be more prestigious for faculty than teaching in the comprehensive community college. Also, students attending such an institution would presumably be more academically oriented and thus easier to teach than the usual community college student.

I was also intrigued by the lack of both administrative and faculty support for the more radical or innovative ideas about the community college, i.e. the Community-Based Learning Center and the Postsecondary Occupational Training Center. Is this lack of support because those in academe are inherently conservative (another stereotype), or is it because the respondents in the survey think these directions have merit but find that of Comprehensive Community College the most meritorious? We don't know at this point, but I would suggest that it is important that those who are outside the institution, those who only know about the community college from what they read, be aware that those <u>within</u> the institution do not seem to support some of the directions so blithely espoused by people who are usually far removed from the everyday workings of the institution. In other words, I find a discernable gap between "national" visions for the community college and the visions of those people who <u>are</u> the institution: its faculty and administrators.

As regards preferences for images, some interesting configurations appear when we examine them in terms of their relationships to the three components of the community college mission mentioned earlier -- open access, comprehensive two-year curriculum, and community orientation.

For example, the two images most clearly indicative of open access -- democratization of higher education and providing a 'second chance' -- received little support by either group for their own campus: a combined total of 5.5% from administrators and 7.3% from faculty. For SUNY community colleges in general, the support was somewhat greater: 15.5% from administrators and 13.7% from faculty. Is the greater support for these images for SUNY in general as opposed to one's own institution an example of, "Let someone else do it"?

The faculty in the study seemed to experience some tension regarding open access judging from their responses to an open-ended question about the future of SUNY's community colleges. Of the 36% of the faculty who wrote comments, 15 of them mentioned open access in some way. While a few of the comments were supportive of open access, the more typical comment indicated a desire for a more academically able student and a skepticism about the value of completely open access. For example, we have such comments as these:

> "I think far too much of [the] community college's resources are spent in remediation. Much of what we, out of necessity, do should have been accomplished either on the secondary level or at an institution . . . prior to matriculation."
>
> "The most serious problem we face is the large number of students not doing any meaningful amount of work on homework. I believe one reason for this is the completely open admissions coerced by Albany [headquarters for SUNY central administration], robbing the student of any pride in being accepted."
>
> "I am concerned about lowering entrance standards. I am <u>wholeheartedly</u> in favor of the 'open access' idea, but do students with <u>3rd grade</u> reading levels belong in <u>any</u> college?

In comparison, while five of the administrators alluded to access, it was always in a positive vein and never critical or questioning. For example, we have the following:

> "The community college may be the best vehicle for improving access to higher education and for upgrading educational skills. It should certainly strive to do so."
>
> "Ideally, the community college must retain open access for a lot of reasons including the obvious evolution which is occurring in the public and private universities."

How can we interpret these differences? Perhaps for senior-level administrators, open access and its corollary, remedial programs, do not provoke the same concern as they do with faculty because the administrators don't have to be in the classroom contending daily with the results of an open admissions policy. The view from the top is almost always different than the view from the trenches.

The other two images somewhat linked to the component of open access were "Excellence in Teaching" and "A Student Oriented Institution." Not surprisingly, faculty were most enthusiastic about the image of "Excellence in Teaching," both for their own campus (32%) and for SUNY community colleges in general (35.2%). Administrators were certainly supportive of this image, but to a lesser extent: 23.3% for their own campus and 17.8% for SUNY in general. Perhaps that is because promotion of such an image would be far more beneficial to the status and ego of faculty than of administrators. As regards the image of "A Student Oriented Institution," I found it both intriging and surprising that so few administrators and faculty supported this image: fewer than 7% of the administrators or faculty preferred this image for either their own campus or for SUNY community colleges in general.

While the component of open access gets little support (in terms of

choices for preferred images) from either administrators or faculty, the other two components (comprehensive curriculum and community/local orientation) receive more support. However, faculty are more supportive of the images reflective of the component of the comprehensive curriculum while administrators are more supportive of the image pertaining to the community orientation component. Most likely, these preferences fall out as they do because faculty are more immediately concerned with the curriculum than are administrators. Also, senior-level administrators would tend to concern themselves more than faculty do with the external relations of the institution, its ties to the community.

In sum, then what can we conclude about "insiders'" attitudes toward the community college from all of this?

1) First of all, those within the institution basically support the status quo: the direction of the community college as an institution with a comprehensive curriculum, providing transfer programs, vocational training, and community service.
2) While not desiring that the community college become a more educationally elite institution, those within it do not want its open access policy to be its dominant quality or characteristic in the public's mind.

These are not earthshaking conclusions. What they do add to the critical debate about the social role of the community college is to indicate that those within the institution seem to believe in what it is currently doing: providing an opportunity for community members to re-

ceive some college-level work and some occupational training. Leftists may decry these efforts as politically insignificant, and Rightists may denigrate them as educationally lacking, but most community college faculty and administrators -- in SUNY at least -- will continue to function (and I think function well) in the institution that does indeed offer "something for everybody." How long it can continue to do so with the funding concerns prompted by today's economy and with competition from other sectors of education is debatable -- but that is a topic for another conference.

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